

Brelsford House (The Banyans)
1 South Lake Trail
Palm Beach
Palm Beach County
Florida

HABS No. FLA-225

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20243

THE BRELSFORD HOUSE
(The Banyans)

Location: 1 South Lake Trail, Palm Beach, Palm Beach County, Florida.

Present Owner: Royal Poinciana Chapel.

Present Occupant: Unoccupied 1971. [Demolished August 1975.]

Present Use: [Site is used as a parking lot for the Royal Poinciana Chapel.]

Significance: In the center of old Palm Beach, E. M. Brelsford, the first Palm Beach Postmaster (1887), began this house ca. 1888, completing it in 1903, in the prevailing style--a large "cottage type" wooden building with plate-glass windows. NR 5/31/74.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Begun 1888, completed 1903.
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: E. M. and J. H. Brelsford, brothers from Ohio, bought the land--not only the house site but a great deal more, as well as the point of land they called Brelsford Point--from Frank Dimick in 1880. Later, in 1893, they sold off part of the land to Henry M. Flagler. E. M. Brelsford completed The Banyans in 1903, and he or members of his family lived there for forty years when it was sold to Burt Winters in 1943, then to John Malbach [Maibach] in 1963, and ultimately to the Royal Poinciana Chapel in 1967.
4. Builder, contractors, and suppliers: Little data except that transporting building materials was easy over rail and railroad bridge to Palm Beach and West Palm Beach.
5. Original plans and construction: No data.
6. Alterations and additions: The upper attic rooms have been the most recently furnished. Rooms in the original part of the structure seem not to have been used for living quarters originally. The old furnace in the basement cannot be original as it has a patent date of 1916. The new electrical furnace is a recent addition.

B. Historic Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Four years after the Brelsford's bought the land described above, a Captain Hendrickson and the Brelsford's built a store on Brelsford Point in 1884. On January 15, 1887, a post office was applied for, under the name of Palm City. This was changed on October 1, 1887, to Palm Beach, with E. M. Brelsford as postmaster. Brelsford began The Banyans soon afterwards.

The store, a corner of which became the post office, was an important center of Lake Worth life for some time. Brelsford Brothers' notes, drawn on a Jacksonville bank, were as good as cash in the lake area.

When Henry M. Flagler came to Palm Beach in March 1893 he stayed three days, choosing sites he wanted to buy for his Royal Poinciana Hotel and Whitehall. His agent, Albert Robert, paid the Brelsforths \$50,000 for a strip of land, including the point (later Flagler's Point), and land occupied by their store (which they moved off to a site on Main Street north of Flagler's hotel site). Soon after Flagler's Whitehall was finished (1900-1902), Brelsford the postmaster completed The Banyans (1888-1903) and he or his descendants lived there for forty years. On the front lawn was a notable tree after which the house was named. There is at present the remains of a once-massive banyan tree in the yard, and a Ceiba tree (also called a banyan) of great size.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Flagler Museum Archives Room, Box #4, containing a short undated newspaper article with information on Flagler and the Brelsforths.

Historical Society of Palm Beach County, offices in the Henry M. Flagler Museum. [Old views.]

2. Secondary and published sources:

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Pierce, Charles W. Pioneer Life in Southeast Florida. Edited by Donald Walter Curl. Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970.

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Summer 1971

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This late 19th-century house is a noteworthy example of Colonial Revival architecture. The high ceilings and generously proportioned windows are well adapted to the climate and the view of Lake Worth on the west.
2. Condition of fabric: The house is unoccupied and beginning to show the effects of disuse. Exposed wood such as the plinths of the major columns are decaying and paint is flaking. Walls on the interior are relatively sound.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Including the piazza the east-west dimensions are approximately 77'-4" and the north-south measures 91'-4". The front ell of the house is five bays wide, the central bay fronted by a tetrastyle colossal portico which is in turn flanked by a one-story three-bay colonnaded piazza. The shape is irregular, with lateral and corner projecting bays, and in height is two stories and an attic over a basement.
2. Foundations: Brick piers.
3. Wall construction, finish, color: Walls are white clapboard, 4-1/2" to the weather. Cornerboards are treated with an inset bead molding.
4. Structural system, framing: Wood frame.
5. Porches, stoops, bulkheads: A one-story piazza on each side of the two-story portico on the west front continues around the north and south sides of the house and returns around the southeast corner of the house. The bays on the west are approximately 7'-4" on center, and on the south the seven bays are 10'-0" on center. These one-story bays are defined by Roman Ionic wood columns, doubled at the corners and at the beginning of the portico. Resting on 16" square plinths they support a 2'-6" denticulated entablature, consisting of a small-scale architrave molding, a plain frieze, dentils between two moldings, and a simple cornice under the eaves. It should be noted that front wall openings are not axial with the formal bay system above. The flat second-floor level deck of the piazzas is balustraded, with square pedestals located directly over the first-floor piazza columns. On the south, wood steps, 6 risers, are in the bay next to the service wing.

The principal accent is on the west front in the two-story pedimented portico projecting 4'-0" in front of the piazzas. The gabled pediment is supported by colossal fluted wood Roman Corinthian columns, approximately 23'-0" high with an approximate diameter of 32".

The portico consists of two end bays approximately 3'-9", and a central bay 4'-10". The entablature consists of an architrave of three flat members and a crown mold, an undecorated frieze and a bracketed cornice over dentils and crown molding. The details are repeated in the raking cornice of the pediment except that the brackets are omitted. The full width wood steps of 6 risers begin at a concrete stoop and are enclosed by wood pedestals stepped in two stages. The end columns of the portico are reflected as pilasters on the wall of the house for full height. Smaller-scaled pilasters are superimposed on them to reflect the end piazza column. There is an uncovered wide wood stoop at the east end of the service wing.

Bulkheaded exterior steps and a flight of stairs under the service stairs lead to the basement where there is a trunk room.

6. Chimneys: Two brick chimneys on the main house are corbeled at the top below a concrete coping. There is a similar chimney on the service wing.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance doorway is incorporated into a two-story frontispiece under the portico. The doorway itself is framed by four fluted pilasters supporting an entablature, enclosing door, sidelights, and transom. The door 4'-0" x 7'-0", contains a beveled plate-glass light, 3'-0" x 3'-6", over a raised horizontal panel. Sidelights are fixed leaded clear glass, 21" x 47" over raised beveled panel. The 21" x 14" transom is also leaded. The brass doorknob and escutcheon have a small beaded edge. Above the doorway is a bracketed wood balcony with wood balusters and pedestals, located in front of a Palladian-like window grouping. Here the plain mullions between the windows are doubled and support a small-scale entablature and pedimented gable. At the end of the north and south piazzas, wood doors, 3'-0" x 7'-0", have a single light, 23" x 29", over two horizontal panels. The operating transom above contains four lights, 7-1/2" x 6". The exterior door on the east is 3'-5" x 7'-0" with a single beveled plate-glass light, 29" x 43", flanked by sidelights, 12" x 47" over beveled wood panels. The doorknob and escutcheon are similar to the west door. Wood trim is plain except for a shallow architrave at the head.
 - b. Windows: On the west and the north wall are two large single-hung windows. The bottom operating sash is 8'-0" wide by 4'-0" high, of plate glass, under 16 fixed lights, 11" x 12" in a fixed sash. In the octagonal bay on the northwest, first-floor corner are similar single windows, 4'-7" x 3'-7" under six lights, 12" x 14" in a fixed sash. On the second floor, windows are also single-hung, 2'-9" x 3'-2" with six 11" x 10" lights in the fixed overhead sash. The typical dormer window on the third floor is single-hung, 2'-2" x 1'-7" under six 8-1/2" x 7-1/2" lights in a fixed sash.

On the stair landing there is an arched window opening with a bottom sash 3'-7" x 2'-8" under a fanlight. This window is glazed with crackle glass and leaded in a 4" wide vertical pattern surrounded on the sides and bottom with a 4" wide elliptical design.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The hipped roof is covered with asbestos shingles. The balustraded deck of the hipped roof is covered with standing-seam copper sheets.
- b. Cornice and eaves: Cornice and eaves exhibit a plain frieze and denticulated modillion cornice.
- c. Dormers: On the west there are two dormers in the roof of the main house. On the south there are three on the main house and two on the service wing. On the east there are two on the main house and one on the service wing. And on the north, there are two on the main house and also two on the service wing.
- d. Balustraded deck: The hipped roof's balustraded deck is defined by a 2'-6" balustrade between wood pedestals, doubled at the corners, with an intermediate one on each side.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: The basement contains a room for the electric furnace and another for trunk storage.
- b. First floor: A wide central hallway extends through the house in an east-west direction. South of the entrance there is a parlor on the west and a library behind it on the east. North of the hallway is a second parlor with a five-sided open bay on the northwest corner, and a dining room behind it, on the east of which, in line in a projecting wing, lie the pantry, kitchen, and service rooms.
- c. Second floor: The second floor has three bedrooms extending across the west front and an adjoining bath and bedroom on the north and south. Two bedrooms and a bath are in the second floor of the service wing.
- d. Attic: This floor consists of three servants' bedrooms, a full bath, and space for a ladder to the roof deck.
- e. Stairways: The main stairway in the central hallway leads to a central hallway on the second floor. There is a service stairs leading to the second floor of the second wing, and an enclosed ladder in the attic leads to the balustraded deck on the roof.

2. First-floor rooms:

- a. Entrance hall: Floors are hardwood with an 11" baseboard. Walls and ceiling are painted plaster with coved cornice of two molded elements. The picture molding, 8" below the cornice, is continuous with the trim at the head of the window. Paneled doors to the south parlor and to the dining room are double, 3'-0", sliding into side pockets in the wall. The wide cased opening to the north parlor is flanked by 3'-0" high paneled pedestals on which are Tuscan wood columns, well spaced from Tuscan pilasters at the wall.

The 5'-0" wide stairway is mounted on the south wall of the entrance hall. There are 18 risers to the second floor. The molded handrail and newels are stained dark and the slender spiraled balusters are white. The handrail curves around the bottom newel. The arched opening under the landing is supported by a fluted pier and pilaster. There are warm air registers in the floor and wall, in addition to a radiator.

- b. North parlor: Entered by the Tuscan-columned opening from the hall, the basic rectangular plan of the north parlor is broken at the northwest corner by an open five-sided bay. Floors are hardwood. Walls and ceiling are similar to those in the hall. Two 3'-0" paneled wood sliding doors lead to the dining room on the east. A corner fireplace at a 45° angle is faced with glazed tiles and two pairs of columns described as modified Doric, supporting a simple wood mantel. The iron fireback is decorated with acanthus. The electric light fixture in the ceiling is in disrepair. There is both a floor register and a radiator in the room.
- c. Dining room: Floors are hardwood. Walls are painted plaster below the 3'-4" chair rail and wallpapered above. Ceiling is plastered. Cornice and trim are similar to the hall except that there is no picture molding. The fireplace is faced with green glazed tile. Above the denticulated mantel which is supported by columns described as modified Doric, in a wood panel and a second shelf.
- d. South parlor: Floors are similar to other first-floor rooms. All other finishes are typical of those in the hall except that the woodwork retains its natural wood color. The fireplace is faced with glazed green tile. The mantelpiece consists of two fluted wood Ionic columns supporting a classical entablature and mantel. The brick chimney is exposed over the mantel.
- e. Library: Floors and other finishes are typical with coved painted cornice. The baseboard is finished in natural wood color. The corner fireplace is of unglazed terra cotta. The molded terra-cotta mantel is edged with an egg-and-dart molding over bead-and-reel. The terra-cotta panel over the mantel is decorated with fretwork and a beaded edge. The voussoirs in the arched opening also are beaded.

- f. Service area: Floors in the pantry and kitchen are covered in asphalt tile. Walls are plastered below the plate rail and wallpapered above. Ceilings are painted plaster. Service stairs of 18 risers are enclosed in walls faced with 1" vertical beaded wood.
3. Second-floor rooms: All rooms are bedrooms here with similar finishes. Walls and ceilings are painted plaster. Wood paneled doors are painted, and hallway doors have operating transoms. There are corner fireplaces in the southeast and middle bedroom on the north. These are faced with glazed tile below a classical revival mantel. Hearths have glazed tile.
4. Attic: The three servants' bedrooms here have walls and sloping ceilings finished with beaded tongue-and-groove boards.
5. Mechanical equipment: The house is wired for electricity, but it is not certain how extensively. Although the furnace is electric, there appear both warm-air registers and steam or hot-water radiators in the rooms. The presence of bathrooms indicates standard plumbing.

D. Site and Surroundings:

1. General setting: The house faces Lake Trail and Lake Worth on the west. The property extends from the lake to Cocoanut Row on the east. [Note: Cocoanut Row (street), but Coconut Palm (tree).] Paved accesses to the lake form the north and south boundaries. A dirt driveway leads from the south access road to the east piazza of the house. Directly north of the property is the Henry M. Flagler Royal Poinciana Chapel Grounds, west of which is Whitehall, the mansion of the Flagler estate.
2. Landscaping: Landscaping is presently in a state of neglect. A circular concrete walkway leads from Lake Trail to the west portico. Six royal palms are planted in a line to the south. Randomly spaced coconut palms are growing on the St. Augustine grass lawn leading to the lake. The southwest corner of the property is dominated by an impressive Ceiba tree. The house is surrounded by a hedge of croton shrubbery and on the north there is a hibiscus hedge. Mango trees are also found on the south side of the property. On the east lawn, royal poinciana, coconut palms, and a few citrus trees are to be found.
3. Outbuildings: Midway between the house and the street behind it, called Coconut Row, are concrete foundations and a concrete slab--all that remains of what was probably the garage.

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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Florida project to survey the historic architecture of Palm Beach and to emphasize written historical and architectural data was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the Historical Society of Palm Beach County and the Florida Board of Archives and History in the summer of 1971. Under the direction of James C. Massey, then Chief of HABS, the project was carried out in the Historic American Buildings Survey field office in the Flagler Museum, Whitehall Way, Palm Beach, with Professor Woodrow W. Wilkins, AIA, (University of Miami) Project Supervisor; Richard C. Crisson, Architect (University of Florida); Richard High, Student Architect (Georgia Institute of Technology); and Bryan Bowman, Student Historian (University of Florida). Under the general direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS from March 1972, additional documentation was prepared. Archival photographs for the project were taken in April 1972 by Jack E. Boucher, HABS photographer. Editing and final preparation of the documentation was carried out in 1980 in the HABS Washington office by Lucy Pope Wheeler of the HABS professional staff.

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